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Collecting to the Core-Women's Studies in African History

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"Lightning Talks" — Round 2

Erin Engle from the **Library of Congress (LC)** described LC's outreach activities at the **National Book Festival**, and during **ALA's Preservation Week** (April 21-27, 2013). LC has prepared a preservation kit containing basic guidance for personal digital archiving (see <http://www.digitalpreservation.gov/personalarchiving/padKit/index.html>), which contains guidance documents, how-to tips, links to videos, and templates for resource materials. Response to the kit has been very favorable, both from public librarians and the general public.

Philip von Stade noted that our autobiographic memory is the essence of who we are. He is working on a fascinating project to use old photos to unlock memories of Alzheimer's patients. Photos make storytelling easier and fun. The iPod makes an excellent camera for capturing photos then uploading them to an iPad. The iPad's simple and intuitive touch interface is very easy to use, even for computer illiterate people. **von Stade** is developing an iPad app to manage the photos and present them.

Sarah Kim from the **University of Texas at Austin** conducted a study asking participants if they would be willing to donate their personal digital documents to memory institutions.

Many respondents did not think they had anything worth donating (which probably reflects their limited perception of memory institutions); nevertheless, most of them were willing to donate their professional or business documents, but they had privacy concerns about documents relating to their children or themselves. Most survey respondents wanted their documents to be representative of a certain life experience. The act of donation makes people open themselves to a known audience.

Law and Society: Current Advances in the Digital Afterlife

Evan Carroll, co-author of *The Digital Beyond*, reviewed the current legal issues for digital archiving, which are different in every state. Although this is a single problem, there are many approaches to it. For example, Idaho, Oklahoma, and Indiana have laws covering all of an individual's digital assets; Connecticut and Rhode Island's laws only cover email; several other states have legislation in process; and still others have not considered the problem at all.

Legally, the basic rights of privacy expire at death, but today's digital materials have much more information in them than printed materials and are therefore worth accessing. **Carroll** noted that usually a person's email account holds the most information and is the "master key," but each service has different policies for granting access to an executor. **Yahoo!** specifically says that a person's ac-

count is non-transferrable, but **Google** has a helpful page of instructions for gaining access to a Gmail account. It is important when doing estate planning that explicit instructions covering digital archives be included not only in a will but also in a separate memorandum. It may be necessary to appoint a "digital executor" with an understanding of technology to assist the primary executor in handling digital assets.

Because of space limitations, not all of the conference presentations could be summarized here. The conference Website, <http://mith.umd.edu/pda2013/>, has the complete program of presentations as well as a list of attendees. 🌿

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Collecting to the Core — Women's Studies in African History

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Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — **AD**

African women received scant attention as historical subjects before the 1970s. This was largely because early historical records, written primarily by male European travelers, missionaries, and colonial officials, marginalized women's roles and activities. Beginning in the 1980s, a handful of pioneering feminist historians began to focus their research on African women in an effort to counter negative stereotypes and present a more realistic portrayal of their daily lives.

Over the past three decades, the importance of women's studies in African history has steadily grown. The ten monographs discussed in this essay are considered seminal works on the topic. Several have won prestigious awards like the **African Studies Association's Herskovits Prize**, or have been named *Choice* Outstanding Academic Titles. The titles here cover major areas of scholarship, including production and reproduction, economic livelihood, and issues of domesticity, marriage, and sexuality.

Two texts offer authoritative overviews of women in African history. **Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch's** *African Women: A Modern History* offers an excellent general introduction to the topic.¹ Commonly used as a classroom textbook, this work provides a broad examination of how women's lives changed over the course of the twentieth century. **Coquery-Vidrovitch** focuses on several key aspects — marriage, wage labor, urban migration, education, economic activity, and political activism. It is one of the few books that spans the entire subcontinent and highlights how wom-

en's conditions both improved and declined as a result of colonization. "*Wicked*" *Women and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, edited by **Dorothy Hodgson** and **Sheryl McCurdy**, is also often used as a classroom textbook, but primarily for upper-division courses.² The seventeen provocative essays in the anthology explore how women challenged notions of "good" and "proper" behavior in society. In response, these women were often stigmatized, especially by men seeking to regain control over wives, daughters, and sisters.

Colonialism brought about sweeping social, economic, and political changes to the African continent, including profound impacts on conjugal and kinship relations. Cash cropping and the monetization of the economy led to domestic struggle as men and women sought to secure access to strategic resources like land, labor, and capital. New opportunities for education and wage labor, as well as the allure of city life, led many women to leave their villages in search of better opportunities in urban areas. This prompt-

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ed husbands, fathers, and community elders to adopt strategies that restricted women's mobility as related to production and reproduction. In *"I Will Not Eat Stone,"* **Jean Allman** and **Victoria Tashjian** illustrate how the advent of cash cropping in colonial Asante (Ghana) led to a decline in women's socioeconomic status.³ They look at the growth of large cocoa farms and the reliance on women and children to assist with labor and production. However, since the matrilineal system made it difficult for women to share in the profits of cash crops or inherit property from their husbands, time spent on the cocoa farm meant less time for women to pursue their own cash-generating activities and women were reluctant to invest labor in their husbands' farms knowing that divorce or widowhood could leave them destitute. Similarly, **Elizabeth Schmidt's** *Peasants, Traders, and Wives* explores how the adoption of cash cropping in colonial Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) undermined women's quality of life.⁴ In an effort to prevent men from migrating to nearby mines to secure wage labor, the Shona people began to cultivate cash crops. Women played a significant role in the formation of a peasant economy, but as a result, experienced a significant increase in their work burden. Dissatisfied with agrarian life, many women decided to flee and pursue better opportunities elsewhere. In response, male elders partnered with colonial officials to enforce customary law, which restricted women's migration and independence. **Schmidt** argues that women's loss of control over the products of their labor led to a general decline in their social position.

Another work that showcases colonialism's impact on conjugal relations is *Marriage in Maradi*, by **Barbara Cooper**, which traces changes in marriage rituals and responsibilities among the Hausa of Niger and was a 1998 **Herskovits** award finalist.⁵ **Cooper** argues that most changes were precipitated by the region's political economy. Specifically, following the decline of slavery, work traditionally done by slaves was largely passed on to junior wives. This led to increased hierarchical ranking of women in households as women sought to assert status through seniority and class. Additionally, wedding ceremonies became much more elaborate as expensive wedding gifts grew to symbolize a bride's value and worth. **Cooper** also examines the practice of female seclusion, which afforded women leisure time to engage in petty trading.


During the colonial period, many women migrated from rural areas to cities in order to find wage labor and improved living conditions. Many of these women were employed as domestic servants in white settler households. Another popular occupation was market trading. In the absence of formal employment opportunities, some women sold beer and liquor or engaged in prostitution, both of which were illegal in the colonial state. **Belinda Bozzoli** and **Mmantho Nkotsie's** *Women of Phokeng* chronicles the lives of twenty-two black South African women.⁶ Born near the turn of the twentieth century in the small rural village of Phokeng, these women spent the early part of their lives working on farms and attending school at Chris-

tian missions. In early adulthood, many decided to migrate to nearby cities in search of wage labor and were employed as domestic servants, typically saving their income for marriage and families. Some women also engaged in illegal beer brewing to supplement their incomes. The political and economic turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s drove most home to Phokeng to retire. **Bozzoli** examines how gender impacted the lives of these women, whose stories occupy a central role in the book.

Trouble Showed the Way, by **Claire Robertson**, studies market trading in Kenya's capital city, Nairobi.⁷ **Robertson** examines why women engage in trade and how the terms of trade declined over the course of the twentieth century. **Robertson** interviewed sellers at various markets in the Nairobi area, and argues that many women began trading in response to an economic crisis, such as extreme poverty, landlessness, or unpaid medical expenses or school fees. Additionally, because women were less likely to have completed primary or secondary education, trading was one of the few wage occupations available to them. **Robertson** points out how women were at an overall disadvantage in terms of expanding their businesses. Government policies often favored men in terms of extending credit, thus women were unable to build large-scale enterprises due to low working capital. Women also carried additional childcare duties and other domestic responsibilities. Also set in Nairobi, **Luise White's** groundbreaking book *The Comforts of Home* argues that prostitution in the colonial city was different from other areas like North America and Europe in that the absence of pimps allowed women to control their earnings, accumulate wealth, and invest in real estate property.⁸ Additionally, hired women often compensated for a wife's duties, providing male migrant workers with domestic services such as conversation, home-cooked meals, and bathing assistance. This book received the **Herskovits Prize** in 1991.

Colonialism also altered the most private aspects of women's lives and affected sexuality, marriage, and domestic arrangements. European missionaries, colonial officials, and settlers imported Victorian notions of domesticity, in which a woman's place was in the home. Additionally, colonial policies sought to redefine marriage and regulate sexuality and reproduction. The eleven essays in *African Encounters with Domesticity*, edited by **Karen Tranberg Hansen**, investigate various strategies employed by Europeans to reconstruct domestic norms in Africa.⁹ These included educational sessions in which women were instructed on household management, child-rearing, health and hygiene, and entertaining guests. Further, colonial policies favored men's presence in public spaces while women were relegated to the home. **Hansen** points out, however, that these efforts were largely unsuccessful. For the most part, African women adopted some aspects of domesticity and discarded others. The European idea of domesticity had the greatest impact in eastern and southern Africa where there were larger white settler communities. **Diana Jeater's** *Marriage, Perversion, and Power* examines efforts by the colonial state of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) to regulate African marriage and sexual activity through legislation.¹⁰ This

was largely done through the construction of moral discourse, which outlined acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Legislation was enacted to legitimize marriage and provide wives with legal rights. Again, these efforts were not very successful because the legislation was often contradictory and haphazardly implemented and enforced. **Jeater** argues that as a result, sexual matters such as adultery became a matter of public debate rather than a private concern.

Together, the ten classic works discussed in this essay cover nearly every aspect of women's lives in sub-Saharan Africa, ranging from marriage and family life to participation in wage labor in both formal and informal economies. These works examine the various impacts colonialism had on gender relations, as well as how women responded to changing circumstances. Finally, these books represent an important area of scholarship in African history. They are all important works for an academic library supporting an undergraduate degree program in history, African studies, or international women's studies. 

Endnotes

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10. **Jeater, Diana.** *Marriage, Perversion, and Power: The Construction of Moral Discourse in Southern Rhodesia, 1894-1930*. Oxford Studies in African Affairs. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.